

Identity Politics and Class Struggle



Article from 1997 by Robin D. G. Kelley on discussions around identity politics and class struggle. While written twenty years ago it remains relevant to current discussions on the same topic.

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Robert D. G. Kelley is Professor of History and Africana Studies at NYU. He is the author of *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (1990), *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (1990), and a forthcoming collection of essays titled *Yo Mamma's Disfunktional! And Other Essays on the Culture Wars in Black America* (1997).

CLASS POLITICS IS BACK! AND NOT A MOMENT TOO SOON. Income inequality is staggering. Sweatshops and the slave labor conditions that accompany them are on the rise again. Corporate profits are reaching record highs while "downsizing" and capital flight have left millions unemployed. None of this surprises us. For the past 10 years, at least, we've witnessed a greater concentration of wealth while the living conditions of working people have deteriorated — textbook laissez-faire capitalism, to be sure. Certainly the Reagan/Bush revolution ushered in a new era of corporate wealth and callous disregard for the poor. But President Bill Clinton — with the help of a right-wing Congress and rightward-leaning Democratic Party — contributed mightily to the process with the passage of NAFTA, GATT, and the most recent welfare reform bill.

There is a silver lining, perhaps. During the past couple of years, at least, we've witnessed an intensification of class-based opposition to inequality, falling wages, and the overall erosion of working-class life in the United States. Of course, we're far from the intense labor struggles of, say, 1877 or 1935 or 1948, but there are hopeful signs of movement — from the resurrection of the old AFL-CIO under John Sweeney, Linda Chavez-Thompson, and Richard Trumka, the response to union summer, to the founding of the Labor Party, the New Party, and other progressive Third Party formations. In fact, even the language of populism now permeating much of American political discourse shows flashes of class analysis, if not an outright embrace of class struggle: it's "us against them"; time to end "corporate welfare as we know it"; we are engaged in nothing less than a "class war."



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I find it ironic that at the very moment when radical renewal might actually be on the horizon, a handful of self-proclaimed spokespersons on the Left have practically written the "Left's" epitaph. The most vocal and visible of the bunch are Todd Gitlin (*Twilight of Our Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars*) and Michael Tomasky (*Left for Dead: The Life, Death and Possible Resurrection of Progressive Politics in America*), but some of their ideas have been echoed by the likes of Richard Rorty, Sean Wilentz, Robert McChesney, and Jim Sleeper, to name a few. (I suppose Robert Hughes' *Culture of Complaint* might qualify since he writes about the absence of class analysis, but it is so polemical and so anti-Marxist that his passing suggestions for a renewed "Left"

seem gratuitous.) Tomasky and Gitlin, in particular, set out to explain why the Left failed to mobilize a mass-based response to the rise of the Right, why it remains small, divided, and parochial, entrenched for better or worse in the groves of academe. Their explanation: "The Left" has lost touch with its Enlightenment roots, the source of its universalism and radical humanism, and instead has been hijacked by a "multicultural left" wedded to "identity politics" which has led us all into a cul-de-sac of ethnic particularism, race consciousness,

sexual politics, and radical feminism.

Much of the blame is assigned to women, gays and lesbians, and colored people for fracturing the American Left, abandoning honest class struggle, and alienating white men who could be allies but aren't because of the terrible treatment meted out to them by the Loud Minority. Universal categories such as class have fallen before the narrow, particularistic mantras of radical chic: race, gender, sexuality, and disability. Indeed, in their view class is not just another identity, it transcends identity. If the "Left" wants to save itself, we must abandon our ever shrinking identity niches for the realm of majoritarian thinking. After all, we're told, the majority of Americans are white and heterosexual and have little interest in radical feminism, minority discourse, and struggles centered on sexual identity.

In some ways, I can sympathize with these people about the limitations of "identity politics." While the growing interest in the politics of identity has extended our analytical scope to overlooked or trivialized cultural spheres and expanded our understanding of intellectual history, in some circles it has also tended to limit discussions of power to cultural politics. And while so-called "identity politics" has always profoundly shaped labor movements and -- even more than vague, abstract notions of class unity -- has been the glue for class solidarity, by the same token it has also become a noose around the necks of oppressed people, as in the case of white racism or certain variants of black nationalism.

ON THE OTHER HAND, WHATEVER CUL-DE-SACS WE MIGHT HAVE ENTERED, the

"Enlightenment train" will not lead us out. These people assume that the universal humanism they find so endearing and radical can be easily separated from the historical context of its making; indeed, that it is precisely what can undo the racism and modern imperialism it helped to justify. The racialism of the West, slavery, imperialism, the destruction of indigenous cultures in the name of "progress," are treated as aberrations, coincidences, or not treated as all. They insist that these historical developments do not render the Enlightenment's radical universalism any less "radical," and those who take up this critique are simply rejecting Enlightenment philosophers because they're "dead white males." Their uncritical defense of the Enlightenment (which includes a strange tendency to collapse Marx, Locke and Jefferson into the same category), betrays

an unwillingness to take ideas, let alone history, seriously. Gitlin certainly acknowledges these contradictions inherent in Enlightenment philosophy, as well as the historical context of slavery, racism, and colonialism. But in an intellectual sleight of hand he brackets these contradictions, reduces a huge body of complex, historically specific ideas to transhistorical abstractions (which he uses selectively to make his case against "identity politics"), and then presumes that Enlightenment thought constitutes the central reservoir of ideas for the very identity movements he criticizes. Says Gitlin:

The Enlightenment is not to be discarded because Voltaire was anti-Semitic or Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Jefferson racist, but rather further enlightened -- for it equips us with the tools with which to refute

the anti-Semitism of a Voltaire and the racism of the others. . . . In none of these cases was bigotry at the core of the man's intellectual system; it reflected the routine white prejudice of the time. The Enlightenment is self-correcting. The corrective to darkness is more light." (p. 215).

Good liberalism, to be sure, but its analytical insight leaves much to be desired. To pose the question as pro or con, keep the Enlightenment or discard it, sidesteps fundamental questions such as the legacy of 18th century social thought for modern conceptions of race or the philosophical underpinnings of racial slavery in an age when free labor and free market ideology triumphed. For example, while racist ideas can be traced to ancient thought and forms of domination internal to Europe, the Enlightenment also ushered in a transformation in Western thinking about race. How could it not? After all, as many commentators since the French Revolution have observed, the expansion of slavery and genocidal wars against non-European peoples took place alongside, and by some accounts made possible bourgeois democratic revolutions that gave birth (in the West) to the concept that liberty and freedom are inalienable rights. This contradiction is fundamental to Enlightenment philosophy, notions of progress, and developments in scientific thinking.

As the work of George Mosse, David Theo Goldberg, Cedric Robinson, and many others has demonstrated, modern racism is one of the "gifts" of the Enlightenment. It is not an accident that during the 18th century modern science moves toward classification as one of its primary endeavors, turning to aesthetic criteria derived from ancient Greece as the source of measurement. These Enlightenment scientists -- in some respects, the founders of modern

anthropology -- begin to associate outward, physical signs of "beauty" with inner rationality, piety, intelligence and harmony.

Thus a century before social Darwinism we see scientific justifications for racial hierarchy and domination. Christian Meiners' influential book, *Outline of the History of Mankind* (1785) put it bluntly:

"One of the chief characteristics of tribes and peoples is the beauty or ugliness of the whole body or of the face." At the same time, the idealization of the so-called "primitive" (the "noble savage idea") espoused by several 17th century travel writers, as well as in flashes of Rousseau, began to give way to notions of European superiority vis-a-vis Africans and Native Americans. Non-Europeans were unambiguously classified as representing a lower stage of human development. The primitive mind was constructed as the very opposite of Reason: atavistic, regressive, barbaric. Again, science provided a rationale for racial hierarchies. Climatic theories explaining the origins of racial difference were called into question by Enlightenment thinkers who proposed the radical idea that Africans, Asians, and "Indians" originated from different species. Voltaire certainly made this claim, as did Scottish Jurist Lord Kames in his *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774), and Charles White in his celebrated *An Account of the Regular Gradation in Man* (1799). Enlightenment thought not only opened the door for future arguments about the inherent inferiority of different "races," but it sharply limited the definition of "humanity."

Thus, at the very moment when a discourse of universal humanism is finding voice in the bourgeois democratic revolutions of the era, colored people and Europeans rendered marginal to civilization (Jews, Irish, etc.) are being written out of the family of "Man." (Is this why the Haitian Revolution is still not considered one of the most important revolutions of the bourgeois democratic era?) Besides assuming that the "universal" is truly "self-evident," the neo-Enlightenment Left cannot conceive of movements led by African Americans, women, Latinos, gays and lesbians, speaking for the whole or even embracing radical humanism. The implications are frightening: the only people who can speak the language of universalism are white men (since they have no investment in identity politics beyond renewed ethnic movements arising here and there) and women and colored people who have transcended or rejected the politics of identity. Moreover, they either don't understand or refuse to acknowledge that class is lived through race and gender. There is no universal class identity, just as there is no universal racial or gender or sexual identity. The

idea that race, gender, and sexuality are particular whereas class is universal not only presumes that class struggle is some

sort of race and gender-neutral terrain but takes for granted that movements focused on race, gender, or sexuality necessarily undermine class unity and, by definition, cannot be emancipatory for the whole.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not giving priority to "identity politics" over the struggle to dismantle capitalism and to build a world we've never seen before -- a world free of market forces and all the terrible things that go with it. Rather, I have trouble with their characterization of race, gender, and sexuality as narrow identity politics while "class" is regarded as some transcendent, universal category that rises above these other identities. Indeed, Gitlin calls the first three, "birthrights," and despite an obligatory nod to Anthony Appiah, he fails to treat these categories as social constructs that have enormous consequences for how class is lived. Along with these so-called "identities" come regimes of oppression. Are churches being burned because black people are alienating white folks? Is that why the Justice Department focuses much of its investigation on black congregations rather than white supremacist groups? Is pro-Prop 187 sentiment and callousness toward immigrants the result of Mexican and Central American immigrants' refusal to be "inclusive?"

I FIND THE NEO-ENLIGHTENMENT POSITION INCREDIBLY
PROBLEMATIC GIVEN WHAT WE

KNOW of the history of class struggle in the U.S. It rests, not on a serious analysis of the social movements lumped together under the heading "identity politics," but on caricature, stereotypes, omissions, innuendo, and historical analysis that borders on the comical at times. Indeed, these movements are rarely ever named and their positions never spelled out in any detail. Yet, despite the lack of depth and scholarly rigor, as well as an over-reliance on personal impressions, these arguments seem to be winning over a broad section of high profile liberals/leftists who believe the time has come for us to "transcend" all this race and gender stuff and get to the matter at hand: class warfare against the bosses. During the recent labor teach-in at Columbia University, for example, both Betty Friedan and Richard Rorty, taking a page from Gitlin's book, told the audience that the time had come to graduate from narrow identity movements to the bigger picture. It was as if antiracist and antisexist struggles were not fundamental to the struggles of working people across race and gender lines, or

worse, that they had been essentially resolved and were no longer pressing problems.

Although their books have been widely reviewed, we have yet to subject the neo-Enlightenment position to a serious political critique. I don't know how many times I've been told, "Don't attack them, they're on our side!" Besides the obvious analogy to the issue of the Left's stance toward Clinton, I'm always inclined to repeat Tonto's response to the Lone Ranger: "What do you mean we?" Of course, to say "we" invites accusations of "identity politics," of identifying with colored people at the expense of the poor Lone Ranger, who is merely low-level manager of capital rather than an owner. But this is precisely the problem: the "we" I'm speaking of includes all oppressed people, including Mr. Ranger if he chooses to join. The Gitlin/Tomasky group makes the grave error of rendering movements struggling around issues of race, gender, and sexuality as inherently narrow and particularistic. The failure to conceive of these social movements as essential to the emancipation of the whole remains the fundamental stumbling block to building a deep and lasting class-based politics.

Part of their problem has to do with their failure to take seriously the ideas coming out of these

"identity movements." Their arguments rest less on what these movements espouse than on their racial, ethnic or gender make-up or their sexual orientation. "Choose a nonwhite ethnicity," Tomasky sneers, "combine it with a sexual practice or a physical condition, and there probably exists a movement to match." (p. 89) Let us take one of their favorite whipping girls: the "black feminist,"

particularly of the lesbian variety. In a bizarre tautology, black feminists are narrowly concerned with their race and sex because they are black feminists. In fact, aside from Alice Walker and the statement issued by the Combahee River Collective (a radical black feminist group founded in the mid-1970s), black feminists in their texts have no names or organizations -- they function as little

more than signifiers (or, to put them in a more traditional context, as scapegoats). Tomasky was kind enough to quote one line from the Combahee River Collective's 1977 statement, though the line he quotes is intended to demonstrate how narrow identity politics can get. For him, the principles of black feminism

are succinctly expressed in the following sentence: "We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity." What he neglected to mention, however, is that the same statement proposed a clear socialist agenda, arguing that emancipation for everyone could not take place until racism, homophobia, sexism, and capitalism are annihilated, and criticized mainstream feminist organizations for not being inclusive enough -- for not dealing adequately with the needs of the poor or with racist oppression of men and women. Nor did Tomasky acknowledge the important line in the statement that "as Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic."

In other words, had Tomasky and Gitlin taken the time to read the material written by black feminists instead of simply reducing them to caricatures of their own imagination, they might have discovered some of the most sophisticated statements of the kind of radical humanism they claim to embrace.

Anna Julia Cooper, whose writings continue to have a profound impact on Black feminism, wrote in 1893:

We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritisms, whether of sex, race, country or condition. . . . The colored woman feels that woman's cause in one and universal; and that. . . not till race, color, sex, and condition are seen as accidents, and not the substance of life; not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is conceded to be inalienable to all; not till then is woman's lesson taught and woman's cause won -- not the white woman's nor the black woman's, not the red woman's but the cause of every man and every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong.

This radical humanism, as theorist Patricia Hill Collins points out, has been a consistent principle of black feminist thought. Alice Walker insists that a "womanist" is "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female," and is "not a separatist" but "traditionally a universalist." Pauli Murray is even more explicit:

The lesson of history that all human rights are indivisible and that the failure to adhere to this principle jeopardizes the rights of all is particularly applicable here. A built-in hazard of an aggressive ethnocentric movement which disregards the interests of other disadvantaged groups is that it will become parochial and

ultimately self-defeating in the face of hostile reactions, dwindling allies, and mounting frustrations.

One could see this vision in the writings of many black feminists, including June Jordan, Barbara Christian, Angela Davis, Elsa Barkley Brown, Pearl Cleage, Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Barbara Smith, Cheryl Clarke, Julianne Malveaux, bell hooks, Margaret Simms, and Filomina Steady, to name a few.

Of course, had Tomasky and Gitlin actually read this stuff, they might jump up in agreement and dismiss these statements as exceptions to the rule. (Whatever the rule is, however, always goes unnamed.) But a close reading reveals that they are not saying the same thing. "If all human rights are indivisible," then why privilege majoritarian concerns over all others and ridicule movements organized around sex, race, and gender? Why presume that such movements are necessarily narrow simply because black women and their concerns are central to them? Nothing could be further from the truth. One vital outgrowth of radical black feminism has been the black women's healthcare movement, its most notable manifestation being the National Black Women's Health Project. Among other things, they have sought to create a healthier environment for poor and working-class women and reduce women's dependence on a health care system structured by capitalism and run primarily by men. If they succeed, imagine how such a transformation might benefit all of us, irrespective of race or gender?

UNFORTUNATELY, THESE NEO-ENLIGHTENMENT LEFTISTS ARE BLIND TO the radical humanist traditions that have undergirded black feminist movements, and this blindness has kept them from seeing how black feminism could contribute to their own emancipation. Similarly, they don't see how gay and lesbian movements might also contribute to our collective emancipation -- a criticism made eloquently by Martin Duberman in his review of Tomasky's book in *The Nation*. Some things are obvious: the continuing struggle of gays and lesbians against discrimination in public and private life have important implications for national civil rights law; the work of ACT UP and other movements have made AIDS visible -- a disease that's killing many heterosexual people, especially poor black women. Less obvious is the role of scholarship coming out of Gay and Lesbian Studies programs as well as Women's Studies programs -- grist for the anti-identity politics mill. Queer theory, for example, begins with the premise that sexuality is a vital part of human existence, and that the way sexual identities are defined (and policed) has to do with social relations of power, the role of the state, public institutions, and social movements. The

best work understands that sexual identities and practices are lived through race and class and can only be understood historically. What does this scholarship have to do with the rest of us? What are the implications for the "universal"? For one, we know now that there is no universal masculinity or femininity. The idea of "normal" behavior is a social construction, which means that there is nothing natural or inevitable about male dominance, the overrepresentation of men in positions of power, or the tendency of men to use violence to resolve conflict. These are all obvious points, to be sure. But how many heterosexual men and women stop to think about the emancipatory potential of a more flexible sexual and gender identity for all of us?

Besides reducing homophobic anxieties, freeing up self-expression, and enabling us to reconstruct our relationships to one another (isn't that what revolution is all about?), I believe a less rigid definition of masculinity may actually reduce violence -- from police brutality to domestic abuse.

While Gitlin tends to be slightly more sympathetic to feminism and gay and lesbian movements than Tomasky, they both view them as prime examples of dead-end identity politics. On the other hand, when they proclaim a movement or issue "universal," they don't stop to analyze how race and gender shape various responses to issues. For example, Tomasky believes he hit on a common value/agenda when he writes: "Working people in this country need a movement that will put their interests and livelihoods first." Fair enough. But without an analysis that takes racism, sexism, and homophobia seriously, or considers deep historical differences, we won't know what "interests" mean.

Let's take crime and the issue of neighborhood safety, an issue on which many people across race, gender, and even class lines can find common ground. Yet, racism -- not narrow identity politics --

persuaded many African Americans to oppose Clinton's \$22 billion Crime Bill, and the majority of white voters to support it. For many black people, the issue of neighborhood safety is not just about more police but the kind of police -- where they live, how they relate to the community. Indeed, no matter what we might think of the Nation of Islam (NOI), many non-Muslims see its fight against drug dealers in black communities as more effective than the police.

It is precisely this kind of economism that enables these people to claim, without evidence, that declining wages is universally more important to most black

people than police brutality or having to wait an hour for a seat at Denny's. One is hard economics that unites people; the other is just narrow identity politics. Thus, when black gays and lesbians take to the streets to protest violence against them, that's "identity politics." When angry white males claim that affirmative action is taking jobs from them, that's class politics muffled beneath a racial blanket they themselves don't understand. When white people vote for David Duke and Pat Buchanan, that's class politics, not identity politics.

Something's wrong with this picture.

Whose Left?

CENTRAL TO THE NEO-ENLIGHTENMENT LEFT'S CASE AGAINST SO-CALLED identity politics is a nostalgia for the Old Left, back in the days before the 60s when everyone who joined checked their race and gender identities at the door and embraced a radical universalism that transcended skin color, ethnic affiliations, and sex. Intense debates over the Negro Question or the Woman Question, not to mention charges of "chauvinism," simply vanish from this romantic narrative. Those were the days of "real" class struggle, the days of the CIO, the Knights, Labor, the IWW, the Reds, the rugged and manly Republican artisans in the Age of Jackson (Andrew, not Michael), the days before identity politics eroded the class struggle and we knew what the working class looked like. Then, around 1970

according to Tomasky, everything fell apart "when the American left cashiered traditional class-based politics for a new variant in which race and gender were preeminent. . . . For black activists, racism became more important than the exploitation of workers by capitalists; for women, sexism."

Who is he talking about? Black Power and feminism had radical and conservative tendencies, and neither uniformly privileged race or sex, or ignored class, for that matter. And what about the black Left? If these activists and the New Left more broadly abandoned "the exploitation of workers by capitalists," why did so many of these folks join Marxist-Leninist organizations in the early 1970s and begin working in factories to organize industrial workers? Workers became very important for the New Left, particularly for African-American radicals. In 1968 and 1969, a fairly large contingent of black, radical students at Duke and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill helped organize key strikes of maintenance and dining hall workers. Former Wayne State students

such as General Baker, Marion Kramer, Ken Cockerel, Ken Hamblin, Luke Tripp, Charles Johnson, and others organized the Revolutionary Union Movement in Detroit's auto plants, which culminated in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW). Some of the organizers who split from the League joined former SNCC leader James Forman and founded the Black Workers Congress.

Not surprisingly, in his book Gitlin dismisses the industrial concentration movement coming out of the New Left in a sentence, probably because it contradicts his central thesis that the late 60s witnessed the flight from universal class struggle. Yet, some of these same people contributed substantially to labor struggles during the "dark ages," and can take some credit for the current regeneration of the movement -- from Eric Mann, who led the campaign to keep GM Van Nuys open in the 1980s, to labor militants like Joe Alvarez, currently the political director for the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE). Alvarez's presence is no small matter, for UNITE is one of the biggest unions in the country, formed in July of 1995 through a merger of the International Ladies'

Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU). UNITE has also taken the lead in the fight against sweatshops throughout the Western hemisphere, building cross-border alliances from Latin America and the Caribbean to Canada.

On the other hand, those white construction workers in the 1960s who battled antiwar protesters and supported Nixon -- the folks Gitlin calls "the Common men" -- were also notorious for having the most racist, exclusionary unions. Now, compare their unions to the local, state, and federal employees unions that supported black struggles for justice. Or compare them to, say, District 1199 of the hospital workers or some locals of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) -- unions that embraced the spirit (and the people) of the civil rights movement. Multiracial public sector unions were able to survive, even thrive, while construction workers belong to some of the most devastated unions in the country. Indeed, when unionization was on the decline, public sector unions increased their membership by 37%.

In other words, given black workers' commitment to organized labor, despite being overrepresented in the unemployment rolls and in occupations that have historically been difficult to unionize, it is ironic that African Americans bear so

much of the burden for the decline of "class politics." Black workers, after all, have the highest union participation rate -- in 1994, 21% of the African-American work force

was unionized compared to 15% of whites. Furthermore, a 1989 AP/Media survey revealed that people of color had stronger union sympathies than whites. When nonunion workers were asked:

"Would you join a union at your place of work?" 56% of African Americans answered yes, as did 46%

of Latinos. Among white workers, only 35% responded affirmatively.

If rebuilding class politics is the goal of the neo-Enlightenment left, and the labor movement is one of the vehicles for doing so, I don't understand why they would invoke Enlightenment universalism to promote a version of American nationalism and support for "majoritarian" values which -- it seems to me -- is the very opposite of the cosmopolitanism they claim to be embracing.

Gitlin deplores the fact that the Republicans have seized the symbols of patriotism and that progressives have failed to promote "Democratic Americanism, an Americanism of constitutional faith strong enough to override the racism of American history. . . ." What an incredibly naive statement; it ignores actual historical context and presumes one can miraculously disentangle the language of

"Americanism" from its roots in white supremacy, conquest, and xenophobia. Tomasky's chauvinism is even more strident:

The United States alone, simply because its power and wealth are still so vast, can set the direction for the rest of the advanced world to follow. . . . An America that rises above its own particularisms and ethnic rivalries might be able to posit itself as an example for others, in Bosnia, in Macedonia, in Russia, in the Middle East and, with some credibility, lead a Western coalition that lays down principles that factions there must adhere to. And for the Third World, especially for those people making six dollars a day weaving those designer garments, an America devoted once again to working people will surely bear fruit.

Can labor really afford to rally behind this sort of nationalist rhetoric in the age

of global capital?

Imagine if the AFL-CIO had been supporting progressive unions across the world rather than U.S.

foreign policy driven by Cold War imperialism? It took NAFTA to spur the AFL-CIO to take cross-border organizing more seriously, and though some campaigns are succeeding, labor leaders now have to break through a wall of suspicion and distrust following decades of AFL-CIO-supported Cold War policy. And yet Gitlin lampoons all Third World solidarity movements. The fact is, the South African divestment campaign as well as Central American solidarity movements opened doors to labor that might otherwise have been shut.

RATHER THAN WORRY ABOUT OFFENDING "MAJORITARIAN SENSIBILITIES," the labor

movement must make antiracism, antisexism, and anti-homophobia foundational. The absurd argument that minority aggressiveness is responsible for white male backlash at the tail end of the 1960s masks the fact that it has been white racism that has tragically inhibited the growth of most progressive movements in the U.S. As W.E.B. DuBois, Dave Roediger, Alexander Saxton, Ted Allen, Noel Ignatiev, Michael Goldfield, Eric Lott, David Wellman and others have demonstrated, racism has been a noose around white workers' necks since the American Revolution. In the South during Reconstruction, a misguided white majority sided with the wrong class and rejected the black workers and sharecroppers who proposed a Democratic South with massive land redistribution. Despite the fact that the black freedom struggle, in alliance with the radical wing of the Republican Party, enfranchised poor whites who didn't have the right to vote before the 15th Amendment, the vast majority of exploited white labor still chose color over class. And in California, it was precisely anti-Chinese sentiment that galvanized the multi-ethnic "white" working class and forged a dynamic union movement on the West Coast during the late 19th century. Of course, white workers were never uniformly racist and there are enough stories of interracial working-class solidarity to fill volumes. But we also must recognize the price these men and women had to pay: white workers willing to commit

"race suicide" often faced the worst of state repression, ostracism, and sometimes hostility within their

own ranks. It's not an accident, for example, that the most militantly anti-racist unions emerging out of the CIO campaigns of the 1930s and 40s were the main targets of McCarthyite witch hunts.

I can't stress enough the importance of the fight against racism right now, especially with a growing backlash against affirmative action under the guise of supporting a "color blind" society. Anyone seriously concerned about the labor movement and building multiracial unity must recognize the fundamental role racism has played in destroying internationalism. Anti-immigrant sentiment, for instance, is not just about class anger, because there really is no mobilization against Canadians or European immigrants taking what are essentially skilled jobs. It's about dark people, whether some invisible Pacific Rim empire run by "sneaky Orientals" or "wetbacks." The history of conquest and, later, repatriation in the Southwest is fundamental to understanding anti-immigrant sentiment, the English-only movement, and pro-Prop 187. Blanket support for "majoritarian" positions simply plays into American nationalism and chauvinism.

So, how might people build class solidarity without suppressing or ignoring differences? How can we build on differences -- by which I mean different kinds of oppression as well as different identities --

rather than in spite of them? One way to conceive of alliances across race and gender is as a set of

"affiliations," of building unity by supporting and perhaps even participating in other peoples struggles for social justice. Basically, that old fashioned IWW slogan, "An injury to one is an injury to all!" After all, contrary to the neo-Enlightenment narratives, African-American social movements have been practicing the principle of "an injury to one is an injury to all" for a very long time: black male abolitionists supported women's suffrage when few white men would; black radicals throughout the early part of the century supported the Irish struggle for self-determination; black soldiers and journalists shed tears at the sight of Nazi death camps; and since Roosevelt, we have been mainstays in the Democratic Party even to our own detriment. Black trade unions were never exclusionary; black labor leaders did not implement Jim Crow locals. And when the Chinese Exclusion Act seemed to have universal support among non-Asian workers, it was a black man, James Ferrell of the Knights of Labor, who told his comrades that they ought to organize the Chinese rather than attack them.

The good news is that most elements of the labor movement understand this, unlike many academics who apparently find the idea of multiple identities too complicated to deal with. Despite their uncritical support of the Democratic Party, the current leadership of the AFL-CIO seems to understand that the labor movement is not about transcending these other social movements derisively labelled "identity politics," but about building alliances and affiliations and learning from them. Across the country, for example, unions have embraced cultural diversity education to reduce white racism, ethnic conflicts, sexism, and homophobia. They've sought assistance from dozens of university-based programs, including those at Indiana University, Division of Labor; University of Iowa's, Labor Center; University of Michigan, Labor Studies Center; University of Minnesota, Labor Education Service.

THE MOST DYNAMIC UNIONS ARE ALSO TURNING INCREASINGLY TO COMMUNITY-BASED

ORGANIZING. In Los Angeles, where Latino and Asian-American garment workers are spread across many small plants and shops, organizing shop by shop would prove costly and time-consuming. The Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) adopted a community-based strategy that has been quite successful.

In Greensboro, North Carolina, UNITE's ability to build a strong base in the black community ensured the success of its boycott of K-Mart last year. Essentially, UNITE launched a campaign to protest racial inequities in wages: K-Mart workers at the nearly all-black facility were making a mere \$4.60 an hour. In addition to filing a complaint with the EEOC, the union enlisted all the key local black community leaders and were able to get over 10,000 signatures on a petition to K-Mart's chairman

demanding an end to discrimination. In other words, rather than simply appealing to black workers as

"workers," they appealed to the black community and tapped a deep tradition of resistance to racism and injustice.

Similarly, members of the Labor Party Advocates steering committee recognized that in order to have substantial representation of women and workers of color at the Labor Party's founding convention, they could not rely solely on established

union contacts. So they made provisions in the convention rules for "designated workers' organizations -- of women, workers of color and other workers' groups including those facing special discrimination" to have voting power if they endorsed the Labor Party.

As a result, groups like the Coalition of Labor Union Women, the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, and Black Workers for Justice were able to participate and represent the interests of workers irrespective of union affiliation. Finally, there are organizations, often products of the best elements of Third World, feminist and black Liberation movements, that don't see race, gender, and sexuality as

"problems" and are, instead, moving working-class politics in new directions: we can point to the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic Justice, the Labor/Community Strategy Center, New Directions, Labor Notes, Solidarity, etc., many of which are led by white radicals (Ann Braden, Jerry Tucker, Eric Mann) who understand that antiracism and antisexism are fundamental to class struggle.

THERE ARE CERTAINLY MANY ISSUES AROUND WHICH
PROGRESSIVE ALLIANCES CAN BE

BUILT -- a renewed labor movement, environmental justice, racial justice, immigrant rights, anti-poverty, etc. Public transit is a site of struggle that literally touches all these issues -- a lesson Labor/Community Strategy Center organizers understand well. They have consistently made connections between civil rights, environmental justice, labor struggles, privatization, and the problems created by capitalism. Bus Riders Union (BRU) organizers see their constituency in all of its

"identities" -- as workers, consumers, largely people of color, and city dwellers tired of toxic living. The Union's demands -- more resources devoted to buses, a moratorium on overpriced rail service, lower fares, better service, safety, no-emissions electric buses, MTA policies that create jobs in inner city communities -- genuinely reflect a range of issues beyond the problem of transportation. The BRU is forging a new social movement, not by appeals to color blindness but by re-thinking class politics in a multicultural context.

BRU organizers also recognize the fundamental importance of culture and

identity for mobilizing working people. The cultural work of the Strategy Center, from its creative use of graphics to attract members to its "dance-a-thons" and related cultural events, sets an example for political movements that understand that "cultural politics" is more than an analytical category or "political escapism" under a different name. It is a practice. Liann Hurst Mann, founding member of the Strategy Center and editor of its new bi-lingual publication *Ahora Now!*, is an architect and designer who has drawn on her experience as a political organizer to develop new ways to "visualize" multiracial, working class struggles. *Ahora Now!* consistently carries articles and interviews exploring cultural work, language, and identity that offer important lessons about "art making" in a political context. In collaboration with the L.A.-based Cornerstone Theater, the BRU plans to transform the interiors of buses into spaces for

"guerrilla theater." As an extension of the BRU's longstanding and successful organizing campaign, its bilingual performances will address complicated issues of race and ethnic identity, citizenship, gender, immigration, language, and capitalism more broadly, while building a multiracial, multiethnic social movement. What is more, the BRU recently wrested a settlement from the MTA that resulted in a victory for all riders, including transit dependent white workers, the disabled, the elderly, and students.

It's ludicrous to blame so-called identity politics of the 1960s for the collapse of the Left, the derailment of progressive social movements, or our inability to roll back poverty and unbridled corporate wealth. We have others to thank for that: Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, Bill

Clinton, Cointelpro, white flight, red squads, red-lining, Contra-backed crack dealers, economic restructuring, the NRA, right-wing think tanks, complacent labor leaders. . . and the list goes on. Of course, the Left -- whatever that means now -- is not blameless. The scars of sectarianism run deep and trace their roots to the glorious days when the Old Marxists were supposedly more "universal."

Street fights erupted between socialists and anarchists; battles raged between the Trotskyists and Stalinists and a variety of sects claiming to be the true heirs of Lenin. And then China entered the picture, along with Albania. These battles within the Marxist world contributed more to the internal implosion and proliferation of left-wing parties than feminism and black nationalism.

Although identity politics sometimes act as a fetter on genuine

multiracial/multicultural alliances, I believe it has also enriched our conception of class. Indeed, there are many serious scholars -- I count myself among them -- trying to understand how various forms of fellowship, racial solidarity, communion, the creation of sexual communities, and nationalism shape class politics and cross-racial alliances. We are grappling with how self-love and solidarity in a hostile context of white supremacy, the embrace of certain vernaculars, can be expressions of racial and class solidarity, and the way class and racial solidarity are gendered. Not to recognize this is to wonder why more West Indian workers participate in Carnival than in the Labor Day Parade, or why District 1199 had the foresight and vision to maintain an 1199 float and/or banner in the West Indian Day parade. Those who pine for the good old days before identity politics, when class struggle meant rough guys who understood that simply fighting the bosses united us, forget that Yiddish was a source of solidarity within the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, to the point where union leaders were offering courses in Yiddish for black and Puerto Rican workers in the late 1950s, to their dismay. Identity politics, in other words, has always been central to working class movements, from minstrelsy on up.

More important, a careful examination of the movements dismissed as particularistic are often "radical humanist" at their core and potentially emancipatory for all of us. We need to seriously re-think some of these movements, shifting our perspective from the margins to the center. We must look beyond wedge issues or "minority issues" and begin to pay attention to what these movements are advocating, imagining, building. After all, the analyses, theories, visions emerging from the black liberation movements, the Chicano and Asian American movements, the gay and lesbian movements, the women's movements, may just free us all. We simply can't afford to abandon the subway, with all of its multicultural messiness to jump on board the Enlightenment train of pure, simple, color- and gender-blind class struggle. Neither Locke nor Jefferson offer a truly emancipatory vision -- not then and certainly not now. Attempts to "transcend" (read: outgrow) our race and sex does not make for a unified working class. What does is recognition of the multiplicity of experiences and perspectives and a willingness to struggle on all fronts -- irrespective of what "the majority" thinks. Recognizing the importance of environmental justice for the inner city; the critical role of antiracism for white workers'

own survival; the necessity for men to fight for women's rights and heterosexuals to raise their voices against homophobia. It's in struggle that one learns about

power and how it operates, and that one can imagine a different world. And it's in struggle, not in the resurrection of ideas that have also provided the intellectual justification for modern racism, imperialism, and the traffic of human beings, that we must begin to develop a new vision.